



radical
democracy

interview:
dominique scott
united students against
sweatshops
movement for black lives

David Olson interviews Dominique Scott

Dominique Scott is a Regional Organizer for United Students Against Sweatshops at the University of Mississippi. She is an activist and organizer in the Movement for Black Lives, and has organized against institutional racism in Mississippi. In 2016 she received the Voice of Change Award from the University of Mississippi Black Student Union. We spoke in the fall of 2016, shortly before the presidential election.

Radical Democracy: A lot of your work as an on-campus activist has focused on confronting the romanticization of Mississippi's racist history. Turning that around, how important is it for folks to understand the history of the Civil Rights or Freedom Movement?

Dominique Scott: **It's absolutely imperative that anybody within the Movement understands its historical context. I argue that the Movement for Black Lives is essentially the neo-Civil Rights Movement, and is building upon that legacy.** It's imperative for people to understand the historical, social, economic, and political context of our movement in relation to previous movements. Our movements are not different. They are only separated by time and space. If you look at the rhetoric and language being used by Black Lives Matter activists, students, and organizers, it is almost identical to the language and the rhetoric of people in the Black Freedom Struggle – but also in the Labor Movement, Women's Rights

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Movement, and so on. They're building on the wins, the lost promises and failures, even the setbacks of previous movements. **To understand what we do, and what do we do next, it's absolutely imperative that we understand the people that came before us.** Now that I'm knee-deep in the movement, one thing that comes up constantly is this pervasive feeling of fear, and this almost bone-deep, visceral sadness and exhaustion that comes with movement work.

If it were not for me understanding the people who came before me — of the price and the debt that has to be paid to do this sort of work — I would've given up a long time ago. I would have given up last year, when I got a call from the KKK. I would have given up when I was harassed in the parking lot of my apartment by white supremacists. But I am doing work for the next generation.

What I'm doing today may not necessarily change the world that I live in, but it might change the world for the people that come after me. In order to not become discouraged, to keep on with purpose, and stay motivated, it's necessary to have an understanding of the people that came before you.

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With the number of the shootings that have been going on, with Black Americans being gunned down by the police, it's been a really hard time. **I feel as though I'm in a perpetual state of mourning. That I'm always grieving for the lost lives of Black people.** And it's really easy to become discouraged by what people who oppose your ideas say to you. Like: We are starting a race war, we are a terrorist organization, and all this misinformation circulating about the current Black Freedom Struggle. If I didn't understand the history, I might internalize those things. I might even believe them, like a lot of folks do. I've heard a number of people talk about the Black Panthers as being the black KKK. If I didn't understand what the Black Panthers were, or are, and who the KKK is, I might believe that sort of rhetoric.

I can't say it enough how necessary it is that activists today understand activists of yesterday.

RD: Are there any particular people, or moments, from Movement history that especially inspire or speak to you?

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DS: Coming to Mississippi I have definitely realized how resilient, and *courageous* the people of Mississippi are. I have a number of heroes that come from not just Mississippi but the whole Southern Freedom Struggle. **I definitely draw strength from Fannie Lou Hamer.**

Listening to her speak, listening to a woman from Sunflower County, from the Delta, go up against institutional power and try to carve out a place for herself and her people within the political process, against all odds. In the face of being beaten, of having everything taken away from her, and of possibly losing her life — she adhered to this idea that she's a human, and American, and deserves the same rights as any other American.

I also draw a lot of strength from Ida B. Wells-Barnett, because she was a woman who fearlessly and unapologetically told the truth. Who was a critical thinker, an analytical woman, who brought the truth about lynching as a form of domestic terrorism to light. Even when she was exiled from her home she continued to live in not only her truth, but in the truth of what was happening to her people, the dehumanizing and horrible things, because of white fear.

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I really try to draw strength from Black women, because when you talk about the Black Freedom Struggle, a lot of men come up, and a lot of male faces. It's a very male-dominated narrative. But there's a number of women who set the stage and kept the work going, and who did a lot of important things.

RD: We have a woman running in the first presidential election you could be voting in. What's your take on this election season?

DS: **I am trying to just wrap my head around the reality of the political process in the United States.** It has been hammered into me, since I don't even know when, that you're supposed to just get out and vote. But nobody tells you what to do when you're stuck between two choices, and neither represents what you need, or what you believe. I don't know what to make of this. I still don't know what to do. I am stuck. I know for an F-A-C-T fact, I will never in my life vote for Donald Trump. That will never, ever happen. But Hillary Clinton — I have a lot of reservations about Hillary Clinton that I cannot just forget about, or gloss over, in an attempt to pick the lesser evil. Because the problem with the lesser evil is that it's still evil, regardless.

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RD: Right. Some female activists I've spoken with have talked about pressure to vote for Clinton, the first female Presidential candidate.

DS: As a young Black woman, **I see this huge feminist wave coming to support Hillary Clinton. But that feminist wave has never really included Black women, or any of my issues** — maybe some of my issues, but from a very white perspective. People are continually talking about the wage gap between white men and white women, but you don't hear white women talking about the wage gap between them and Black or Latina women. It's very difficult for me to stand behind Hillary on the woman front, because I am a Black woman and my Blackness and womanness are interconnected. It's impossible to separate the two. I'm neither Black nor woman first, I'm both at the same time, all the time.

And that creates a sort of living and understanding that Hillary doesn't understand. She didn't say "Black Lives Matter" until it became cool. I can't deal with somebody that treats my life like it's trendy, or like she's pandering to a certain group of people, to get votes. I can't vote for a woman whose husband helped to exacerbate the War on Drugs and effectively incarcerate millions of Black people on trumped-up, racist charges. Arguably, she also was involved. These ridiculous minimum sentencing charges and being "tough on crime" came out

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of the Reagan-Clinton era. And Hillary has supported that. She takes money from private prisons, the same prisons that profit off of Black and Brown bodies.

She's also into interventionist wars, which decimate communities abroad, while also dismantling welfare programs domestically. So there's a number of huge problems I have with Hillary Clinton that I cannot just gloss over in an attempt to get her elected instead of Donald Trump. It's really discouraging. I'm very discouraged. Honestly, I feel cheated. I'm twenty-one, and I feel like I've been lied to, I've been bamboozled. I thought that I was just supposed to vote. I thought, you register to vote, and you vote, and the world is supposed to be jolly and good, and it works out. But I'm definitely learning that it doesn't.

RD: It's been disheartening for a lot of folks that we're still fighting, or re-fighting, voter rights struggles that we thought we won long ago.

DS: I'm recognizing the assault on voters' rights, and beginning to see and understand and feel the impact of decisions made to reverse the progress of the Voting Rights Act.

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I had a friend who registered to vote through the same institution that I did, and when we both went to vote, they told him that he was in the wrong district, and to go to another place to vote. He goes to that place to vote, they tell him to go back to the place that we had just come from. He goes to that place, and they tell him, well, your name has been purged, and you can't vote. I had never heard of that before.



Later, I found out that we had the right to fight that, and that we could have insisted on voting — there's just a lot of things about voting that I didn't know. So, it's discouraging.

I've seen firsthand people's votes be thrown out, their registration suddenly disappearing.

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RD: One thing I find encouraging right now is how groups and movements are reaching out and supporting each other, and connecting issues. How important is that, in terms of the Movement work you're doing?

DS: A lot of marginalized groups' problems seem different – and nuanced, but many of our issues stem from the same institutions that are oppressing us. I think of myself as Black, but I'm also a woman, which puts me knee-deep in not only Black people's issues, but also women's issues. When you talk about Black people, you're talking about issues like police brutality and social disparities, but also, you're in the LGBTQ fight – because **if you're fighting for Black lives, you're fighting for all Black lives.**

And that effectively puts you in solidarity with disabled Black folks, with poor Black folks – *all* Black folks. LGBTQ folks could argue, “Well I have my LGBTQ issues, and they’re separate.”

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DS: But you have people of color that are also within those spaces, and they have their own LGBTQ issues tied with their racial and ethnic identity. It becomes this really complex web of our issues overlapping and intersecting and coming together.

It seems that all these problems stem from the same place – which is white, evangelical Christian, and patriarchal. White supremacists, classists, racists, and their institutions and ideologies. These hegemonic ideals uphold whiteness, maleness, and heteronormativity as the norm: anything other is different, and therefore deviant and subject to hoops that have to be jumped through, to achieve basic human rights.

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So it's a necessity for marginalized groups to come together, because our struggles are interconnected, intimately. Whereas one might think that their struggle is independent of other people's struggles, when you really look at it critically, it's not. Typically these marginalized peoples are the ninety-nine percent – there's far more poor people than there are rich people.

If you combine these groups of people and they work in solidarity, there's a much better chance of achieving liberation, because historically, attempting to fight separately obviously hasn't worked. If we're going to move forward, maybe we should change some of the strategies of the past, and not see our Movements as separate, but as different arms and legs and appendages of a greater body.

RD: You talked about the discouraging political landscape a moment ago, in relation to voting rights. Are you hopeful right now about the work your doing and the possibility for change, of making a better world?

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DS: I have to be. If you don't remain hopeful, don't continue to look to the future and a better tomorrow, it would be impossible to do this kind of work. I find a lot of joy in the small progress that has been made. I recognize that, here in 2016, **I now can do things, I have access to things and I can say things that two generations ago, my grandmother wouldn't have been able to do, say, or have access to. Same with my mother. But I also am moved and inspired by the issues that plagued my grandmother, and continue to plague and shape my own life.**

I find a lot of hope in trying to figure out how to make it so that my granddaughter doesn't have the same issues as my grandmother.

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